

Words by

ANCESTRESS
Claire G. Coleman
Jazz Money
Ellen van Neerven

Commissioned for

djillong dumularra
Carol McGregor
and Judy Watson

Artspace
artspace.org.au

16 January – 5 April
2021

Artspace, Sydney

Teila Watson

is a Birri Gubba and Kungalu/Gangalu Murri woman born and raised in Brisbane. Writing and performing as ANCESTRESS, her respect and understanding of Murri knowledges, First Nations self-determination, and the continuation of culture informs her artistic endeavours and fuels her many passions.

Claire G. Coleman

is a Noongar woman whose family have belonged to the south coast of Western Australia since long before history started being recorded. She writes essays, verse and fiction unpacking the effect of colonisation on Indigenous lives.

Jazz Money

is an award-winning poet and filmmaker of Wiradjuri heritage, currently based on the beautiful sovereign lands of the Darug and Gundungurra nations. Her poetry has been published widely and reimagined as murals, installation and film.

Ellen van Neerven

is an award-winning author, editor and educator of Mununjali (Yugambeh language group) and Dutch heritage. They write fiction, poetry, and non-fiction, and play football on unceded Turrbal and Yuggera land.

Letters to Enemy Lines
ANCESTRESS

Dear coloniser,

I am writing in regards to the status of humanness in your society.
Is it at all possible for you to retrieve a sense of sacredness?

Can you recall meaning in: sanity?
Perhaps through repatriation, reparation or redress
Reassigning Governance

Land rights, Land Back, Land Law, re-entrust – Land in trust

Remains rights, Bones Back, Burial Law – plus interest
and then **some more** for instilling war in us.

could you find a way to become human again

I am Story and So are You
Claire G. Coleman

It gets under your skin, you can feel it, the Country you stand on is alive, you can feel it with the soul/sole of your foot; you can hear Country's story with your mind's ear. We have memories, stories, we are not simply things of flesh we are creatures of story; it is story that defines us, the stories we tell ourselves and the stories we tell each other. Everything can hold or carry story, our hearts, our minds, our skin, our clothes; the Country, the land itself, has a story.

I have a story etched into my skin, in the flag needle-stuck in the flesh of my arm, in the lines on my face that are growing deeper with age and with pride. When you meet me you aren't just looking at me, you are reading my story, and I, whether you like it or not, am reading yours. It's inescapable, my story and yours and so is something that many writers (like me) understand, that a story is a collaboration between the teller and the listener.

I carry story down to the marrow of my bones and story is in the bones of Country.

Judy Watson and Carol McGregor are telling stories with their art; McGregor by stitching, etching and painting possum skins – there's story in every hand stitch, in every stroke of a pyrography needle, in every scrape of paint, in every ancestral Country visited; Watson by unpacking, interrogating and repacking the archive, finding therein, perhaps, the story under what is etched into the skin of the paper, exposing that story in works of art. There's story buried in what you are reading now, the story of me seeing and thinking of art, and encoded in this story is some of the story of who I am; you just have to know how to read between the words; uncover the story beneath the surface.

We are the stories we carry, my tale is in here and thus so am I; I cannot write, (writing is my art) and keep my story out of it.

That is an important part of the beauty and power of art, that no artist can produce work without encoding some of who they are within; intended or not. McGregor's cloaks, bringing together the hands and stories of people from different Aboriginal families from different ancestral Countries, encode within them the stories of their makers, the story of Country. Watson's work, on the other hand, tips Australia over, exposes the colony's dark underbelly, digs out the stories in the bones of the nation's soul, the skeletons in the nation's closet, and exposes them to the light.

Unwrap the bones embedded in the story of the nation, unpack them, expose them – we cannot have peace while those bones are there but hidden. When we are done, wrap them in a possum skin cloak, take them home, into the soul of the nation and bury them deep.

Our mothers collect. I don't know why. Every surface, every wall's gotta have something on it. Our house isn't that big either. I guess we've just gotten used to the clutter, learnt to live with it. Me and my sister can get a bit icked looking at the black dolls, their googly eyes staring at us, their exaggerated features, a relic of last century that should be equally put out in the past. Every rubbish truck day I think of scooping them up in my hands, pushing them into a plastic bag without looking and throwing them into the green-lidded bin. But to our mothers, the dolls belong with the tea chest, the vases, the dried flowers, the kitchen sink, the plates. To them, the dolls, who hold animals and shields and sometimes spears, and are lined up on the windowsill like a border, belong here just as much as we do. Painted ashtrays and sugar bowls sit on our side tables though none of us smoke or take sweetness in our tea. In the loo, every time I have to wattle on one of numerous prints our mothers have liberated from an op shop in a bayside suburb or hinterland town. In the hallway cupboard is a pile of printed tea towels, neatly folded and stacked. When the linen cupboard opens a universe of dancing Aboriginal figures, spears, boomerangs, fish, animals, symbols, marks, maps and motifs is let out. Sometimes it would be like a severed skull would emerge from a tea towel if we opened it out. As if blood covered our hands and bones moved in the night. Our mothers keep souvenirs pressed with Melbourne 1956 on them, made for visitors to Australia for the Olympic Games. I've touched these souvenir boomerangs and wondered whose non-black hands made them. They are \$299.99 on eBay. Sometimes when I'm in my room working late at night, I think about my grandparents. I don't know whether it was my grandfather or my grandmother who said this, they were giving me advice about what to do after school. We would make boomerangs and test them out in the park with our uncles and aunties and cousins. Make sure you're the one your boomerang comes back to, they said. I guess it was their way of saying ensure what you make works for you and your people, not for the service of white people who are wanting to control you. I think this 56 boomerang has come back to me, but I didn't make it. In Melbourne 56 there were no blackfellas running races against the world and there were no blackfellas allowed to practice their culture though every visitor to Melbourne wanted to buy a piece of an authentic Australian expression. They make statues of us and we bring them in our houses to rust. I used to think, where do we fit in this? Did our mothers keep these objects as a source of pride? No pride for us, we found nothing in the vacuous aesthetics of sovereign kitsch. The collecting is contagious. Our house is a den that will never be clear of dust, but it is also the place we have begun to hope.

Published by Artspace, Sydney

Commissioned for
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presented in partnership with Sydney Festival

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Designed by Formist
Printed in Sydney by Hogan Print

Artspace respects and acknowledges the traditional owners of the land on which we operate, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present, and their descendants.

Artspace is assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its funding and advisory body. Artspace is supported by the New South Wales Government through Create NSW. Artspace is a member of CAO (Contemporary Arts Organisations Australia).